

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
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FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

CALCUTTA POWER CRISIS

ANNCR:

INDIA'S LARGEST CITY, CALCUTTA, HAS BEEN HIT BY A SERIOUS SHORTAGE OF ELECTRIC POWER, AND THERE'S NO PROSPECT FOR AN EARLY SOLUTION....AS WE HEAR IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM VOA'S SOUTH ASIAN CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN.

VOICE:

ONE IS MADE AWARE OF THE EXTENT OF CALCUTTA'S POWER PROBLEM IMMEDIATELY UPON LEAVING THE AIRPORT FOR THE DRIVE INTO THE CITY. DURING THE DRIVE, WHICH TAKES ABOUT HALF AN HOUR, YOUR CAR PASSES BLOCK AFTER CITY BLOCK OF BUILDINGS BLACKED OUT EXCEPT FOR THE FLICKERING OF COUNTLESS CANDLES AND LAMPS. HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN GOING ON, YOU ASK. FOR WEEKS, YOUR DRIVER TELLS YOU, ONLY LATELY THE OUTAGES HAVE BEEN MORE FREQUENT AND HAVE LASTED LONGER.

POWER SHORTAGES HAVE AFFLICTED MANY PARTS OF INDIA IN RECENT YEARS, BUT NO AREA HAS FELT THEM MORE THAN CALCUTTA, WHICH, WITH ITS EIGHT AND ONE-HALF MILLION INHABITANTS, RANKS FOURTH AMONG THE WORLD'S LARGEST CITIES AFTER NEW YORK. THE OUTAGES, WHICH HAVE BEEN GROWING WORSE, COULD POSE A POLITICAL PROBLEM FOR THE EIGHT-MONTH-OLD COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT OF CHIEF MINISTER JYOTI BASU WHICH WON POWER IN WEST BENGAL STATE ELECTIONS LAST JUNE. FURTHERMORE, THE POWER SHORTAGES, BY DISCOURAGING NEW INDUSTRY FROM COMING TO CALCUTTA, COULD DISRUPT THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS FOR DEALING WITH THE AREA'S NUMBER ONE PROBLEM--UNEMPLOYMENT.

ADDING TO THE EMBARRASSMENT OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT IS THE FACT THAT THE POWER SYSTEM SEEMED TO WORK MUCH BETTER DURING THE NINETEEN-MONTH STATE OF EMERGENCY IMPOSED BY FORMER PRIME MINISTER INDIRA GANDHI. (OPT) LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS CLAIMED THIS WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY RUNNING CALCUTTA'S ANTIQUATED GENERATING EQUIPMENT FULL BLAST WITHOUT PROPER MAINTENANCE. THEY ALSO CLAIM SOME OF THE BREAKDOWNS ARE SABOTAGE, WORK SLOWDOWNS BY PRO-CONGRESS PARTY TRADE UNIONS, AND THEY SAY THAT FORMER ADMINISTRATORS FAILED TO PROPERLY ANTICIPATE AND PROVIDE FOR FUTURE POWER REQUIREMENTS. IN ANY CASE, (END OPT) THE CITY OF CALCUTTA CURRENTLY FINDS ITSELF HAVING TO MAKE DO WITH ONLY ABOUT SEVENTY PERCENT OF THE ELECTRICITY THEY PRESENTLY NEED.

ON HIS RETURN FROM A TRIP TO NEW DELHI TUESDAY, CHIEF MINISTER BASU TOLD NEWSMEN HE WILL CALL A CONFERENCE OF POWER AUTHORITY OFFICIALS NEXT WEEK TO TRY TO EVOLVE SOME SHORT TERM MEASURES TO COPE WITH THE SITUATION. THE STATE'S INDUSTRY MINISTER, KANAI BHATTACHARYA, ANSWERING QUESTIONS OF THE STATE ASSEMBLY, SAID HE BELIEVES THE CRISIS WILL BE SOLVED IN A COUPLE OF MONTHS. BUT, WITH HOT WEATHER FAST APPROACHING, THIS PROMISE IS NOT LIKELY TO HELP MUCH TO COOL THE ALREADY FRAYED TEMPERS OF MANY CALCUTTANS.

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JS/RTD